Dry and Dusty *

In July, 1924 I had my first contact with the dry area of Southern Alberta and the people who live in it. I had received an invitation from Mrs. Clark Fraser at Naco to spend ten days in the dry area speaking to meetings organized by the United Farmers of Alberta. Being at that time an officer of the junior section of the organization, my job was to interest the young people in becomxing members of the only organization in the province, at that time which had a program designed to meet the needs of rural young folks. The U. F. A. at that time was at the crest of its power and popularity, and was easily one of the greatest farm movements on the North American plains. It had a membership of about 40,000 farm men and women. It had elected a farmer government at Edmonton, and it had sent eleven federal members to represent the province at Ottawa.

The leading farm families in every community were almost sure to belong to the organization, and the bitter political schisms which were to develop later as a result of party politics had not yet made their appearance. Thus I was assured of a pretty good audience everywhere I went.

Mrs. Fraser was convenor of young people's work for the United Farm Women, a position she discharged with credit and genuine enthusiasm for several years. She had mapped out a pretty stiff lecture program which included at least two talks a day and sometimes three.

The area to be covered included a territory from twenty-five to thirty miles deep on either side of the Goose Lake line starting just west of Hanna at the little siding of Scotfield and extending east to near the Saskatchewan boundry at Oyen.

The meetings were held mostly in country school houses and in an occasional community hall. The people would come from

* By Donald Cameron

several miles around in Fords, Chevrolets and an occasional Buick. Some would come in buggies, wagons and democrats, and once in awhile ~~sometimes~~ I'd see people driving to the school house on the farm stone boat. Some of the people would be dressed up in their Sunday best; others would come in overalls, unshaved, just as they had left the tractor or cultivator. Before the meeting they would gather on the school house steps, talking as only farmersx will, of the crops and the weather. An occasional young fellow might be wearing a bright-colored xxxxxx silk kerchief around his neck, a ten-gallon hat and high-heeled cowboy boots. These lads would sit on the fence swapping yarns about the Calgary Stampede; or about the stampede at Hand Hills Lake, if their experiences had not extended as far as Calgary.

The men outside talked with that slow earnestness that characterizes men of the soil in every land, and their women, inside, parked the babies, exchanged the latest news and gossip, xxx placed a boiler on the stove for coffee and laid out sandwiches and cake for serving after the speeches.

Quite frequently, while the elders were talking, the young people and those olderx ones who still felt young, would get a ball game going, and sometimes it was football xxx or basketball. I'll never forget an experience at one school house in a district called Warwick, north of Scotfield. This community was settled mostly by Ontario folk with a sprinkling of Scotsmen, Englishmen and Americans. Football was the fame of that district, rather than the more common baseball. Keen rivalry had developed over the years, between the Scotfield and Warwick teams, and people took the weekly clashes seriously.

Both sides were constantly on the lookout for new talent, and many a hired man who had a turn of speed and could use his feet on a ball, got a bonus on his wages as an inducement to remain in the district.

It happened that I too had grown up on football, so I naturally joined in the game. After it was over a Scotfield operator sidled up to me and said: "Say son, I'll give you forty dollars a month and a twenty-five dollar bonus to play for us, if you'll come to work for me till after harvest."

I declined this offer as diplomatically as possible, made my way into the school and was soon called on to make my speech. Just as I was leaving, the same farmer came up to me and said: "Well son, I still think you'll do better with your feet than with your tongue!"

The dry area belied its name during the whole trip, and we had to contend with rain and mud most of the time. The rains had come too late to make a heavy crop that year, but the prospects were fair--much better than in the disastrous years of 1921 and 1922 when hundreds of people abandoned their land and moved away.

Everywhere we went we met fine people--people who were the salt of the earth. Everywhere we went there was a grim determinatio to succeed, and a boundless optimism. "The land is rich," they said. "It is the easiest land to till in America. The best wheat in the world can be grown here cheaper than anywhere else." They still had faith in the country, despite the warnings given by the dry years of 1917 and 1922.

Most of the people had never heard of Captain Palliser and his report. They still believed that the dry year was the exception, and that a repetition of the bumper crops of

1915 and 1916 would put them on their feet again.

In 1930 I began the first of a regular series of trips through the dry area. Every fall, for about five years, equipped with a moving picture machine, a choice of films and lectures, I went through the dry area for the Extension Department of the University of Alberta. Again it was a gruelling grind of two and three lectures a day with visits to friends in between, and discussions in someone's home until two or three o'clock in the morning.

In these years the country was not smiling and green as in 1924. Instead it was sombre and brown. Dark brown stacks of Russian thistle dotted the fields instead of the yellow straw piles from fields of wheat. Gaunt cattle and horses foraged in the fields. Dams and dugouts dotted the ravines where people had tried to conserve the run-off to get water for thirsty stock. Houses and buildings were worn and weather-beaten for lack of paint. In many a school the children were badly clad and undernourished. Wheat, in November, was down to ~~19 xxxx~~ 19 cents a bushel at the local shipping point, but there was practically none to sell. Cattle and hogs were two cents a pound on the hoof, but people didn't have enough feed to put them in market shape. Thousands of head of cattle and horses died of inflamation of the intestines from eating badly cured Russian thistle. In the country stores Government relief in the form of food and clothing were added to the feed and seed relief that had gone before. Carloads of flour and vegetables were shipped in free by better favored communities in the north and west.

Men and women, worn and bent with toil and aged before their time, carried on a grim struggle against two calamities at the same time. One was the man-made depression of the 1930's. The

other was the xxxxxxxxxxxxxx most devastating drought since the first plough broke the prairie plains.

To those who wished to leave, the Government offered free freight and a chance to re-locate in the more humid regions of the north and west. But people's roots go deep in twenty years. Every dollar that these settlers owned, the best years of their lives and the high hopes of a courageous people had gone into this land. The sun and wind and dust of this land had burned its way into the very souls of these men and women,. Most of them were on past middle life, because the young people had gone away as soon as they were able,, to work in more promising communities.

A lot of the people stayed. This was their country. The swirling dust and driftin sand obscured the sun. Paint curled and disappeared from the buildings. Machinery wore out twice as fast as in ordinary times, because it was constantly working in a mixture of sand, oil and dust.

Curiously, the people found a blessing of humor to lighten their cares. "Saw a strange thing today," a fellow might say," looked like a chimney thrustin' up out there in the field. Walked over and saw it was just my well, stickin' up there twenty feet!"

"Dust was bad yesterday," another might say, " seemed like the whole earth was blowin' away. Looked up, and xxxxxx by God, there was a gopher diggin' a den as he went right over xxxx my house!"

"Along with the dust," a farmer would relate," a horrd o' grasshoppers come along to finish what crop I had left. Wife got a flock o' turkies and sent 'em out to eat them hoppers. 'Twasn't long before the turkes come back, and it was some sight! The hoppers had picked the birds and had 'em

all ready for the market!!!"

The ones who stayed were the people who have made this western country what it is; people who sacrificed and struggled to see that their children had an education--a better chance in the world than their parents had. There were people like the Frasers, the Hodges, the Blairs and the Crosses, and a whole family of Millers. The four Millers formed a male quartet and helped to enliven many an evening in the community hall.

There was big Jim Doolan, the country storekeeper--big, bluff, friendly, with a shrewd eye in his head an an understanding heart for the people who were dried out. There was the ascetic, scholarly Henry Jack, bachelor, banker-turned-farmer. And over at Sedalia there was John Dahl and his large family of boys and girls. John Dahl was one of Norway's many gifts to Canada. A successful farmer and intelligent citizen, he was a man anyone would be glad to call friend. And there was Norman Fisher, plant breeder, student and Socialist long before that particular brand of political thinking became popular. These and many others like them, were responsible for building up that fine spirit of neighborliness and responsibility which has become so characteristic of the people of the dry belt.

They are people who in the stern struggle have in the main proved themselves the fittest. They have developed methods of cultivation which are cheap and economical; they have evolved a system of municipal government that keeps their costs at a minimum; and, what is even more important to their permanence of tenure each one now has enough land so that even in the thinnest years he can manage to get by.